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THE POEMS OF TRUMBULL STICKNEY.

BY WILLIAM VAUGHN MOODY.

THE name of Trumbull Stickney, which appears upon the volume of his Poems* which was issued under the editorship of his literary executors, is little known to the public, for his foreign residence and his distaste for the magazine as a literary conveyance combined to postpone for him the hour of recognition. But no one can read the volume of his poetical work now collected, without realizing that his sudden death at the age of thirty was a profound loss to American letters. The body of his work, though small in comparison with his ample plans, is large enough to contain poems, and those not few, of a beauty which time will only heighten and confirm.

Joseph Trumbull Stickney was the son of Austin Stickney, professor of Latin at Trinity College, and Harriet Champion Trumbull, fourth in line of descent from Jonathan Trumbull, sometime Governor of Connecticut. He was born June 20th, 1874, at Geneva, Switzerland. Until he was five years old the family resided abroad, spending their winters in Florence, their summers in the Swiss mountains and their autumns upon the Italian lakes. During the remaining years of his boyhood and youth, residence in America was varied by frequent journeys abroad, and by a winter which he spent in school at Clevedon, England. Except for this single term of formal instruction, and another at Dr. Cutler's school in New York, he received his early education entirely at the hands of Professor Stickney. Between the father and son there grew up a rare companionship of mind; the boy was led at once to the pure and ancient fountains of culture, and drew in with his earliest consciousness the love of noble letters. This, together with the romantic color and golden

* "The Poems of Trumbull Stickney," Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 8vo.

charm which Italy and Switzerland lent to his young experience, made his preparatory years almost beyond example fortunate, if we may speak of good or evil fortune in a matter so mysterious as the growth of a talent.

He entered Harvard College in the fall of 1891. He was then, and he remained until the end of his life, a picture of radiant youth—very tall, a figure supple and graceful as a Greek runner's, a face of singular brightness moulded upon lines of earnest strength, a demeanor in which boyish simplicity was combined with implications of an experience more rich and a social habit more complex than our New World civilization affords. From the ordinary activities of college life he remained aloof, deterred partly from within by shyness and by the austerity of his intellectual view, partly from without by the sentiment, approaching awe, which his personality inspired in the average barbarian breast of the undergraduate. To his few close friends he was the most open-hearted of companions, expressive in affection, kindling with beautiful ardor when his imagination was touched, by nature grave even to melancholy, but full, nevertheless, of fantastic humor, and capable of mounting to elfin heights upon the gales of fun. Poetry was already the absorbing passion of his life. From his Freshman year he was an editor of the *Harvard Monthly*, to which he contributed generously all through his life, preferring it to the professional magazines.

He graduated in 1895, with honors in classics, and in the following autumn established himself in Paris, as a student at the Collège de France and the Sorbonne. Here he remained for eight years, devoting himself chiefly to Greek and Sanskrit, so far as formal studies were concerned. Meanwhile, he was thinking deeply and living richly along the paths marked out by his temperament, wherein the Puritan strain formed a solid rock basis, covered with the flowers and vines of a pagan sensibility, and interpenetrated as by veins of fire with a passionate poetic imagination. His rooms were at first under the shadow of the Pantheon, afterwards in the rue d'Assas behind the Luxembourg Gardens. These latter apartments were themselves a kind of poem, allegoric of their owner's nature in their happy distinction, their rich grave harmonies, their just and heartfelt ornament, their vista of windows opening on the venerable garden, whose air of stately melancholy merges so well with the merriment,

intrigue, and *bravura* of Latin-quarter life, and clothes itself so gently with the glories of the seasons as they pass. Stickney loved Paris and her environs with a whole-hearted love, and felt the poetry of the place as few foreigners have done. Fontainebleau, for example, he knew in its every sylvan fastness; and I have seen him walk in that vicinity at darkest midnight across fields and through a tangle of lanes and woodland paths, guided by long familiarity as by a supernatural sense. The emotion of homelessness, which runs in a haunting undertone through his poems, made him cling with a peculiar eager fondness to these regions which were the nearest that he had known to a real abiding-place.

In pursuit of his degree, Stickney mastered virtually the whole *corpus* of Greek literature, from Homer to the New Comedy. His understanding of the genius of the language was profound. There could be no more vital exhibition of the sympathetic intelligence than the manner in which he would approach an ode of Pindar or a dialogue of Plato, lingering in its opening phrases until, as if by the mimetic process of a woodland creature, his mind gradually suffused itself with the color, moulded itself upon the fibre, beat with the tremulous secret life of the masterpiece in his hand. For scholarship as such he cared not a whit, but for the privilege of living back into the life of the great Hellenes he cared infinitely, and by infinite pains made himself able to do so. His Sanskrit studies, though they had not been carried so far, were pursued with an equally creative ardor. He dreamed of making in his own poetry I know not what new synthesis of Eastern with Western thought. His dramatic monologue, "Oneiropolos," which is put into the mouth of a Hindoo as he stands "selling dreams" to degenerate Athens, gives a hint of what he might have done in this direction.

In 1902 he published, at Boston, a volume entitled "Dramatic Verses." The book contains much of his loveliest and most characteristic work, but owing to the manner of its publication, in difficult type and at a high price, it obtained little currency. In the spring of 1903 the University of Paris gave him its degree of *docteur ès lettres*, never before conferred upon an American. Immediately thereafter he went to Greece, where he spent three months wandering with guide and donkey among the scenes in which his imagination had dwelt almost from infancy. Seven

"Sonnets from Greece" remain as the poetic record of this journey, written at Sunium, on Mt. Lykaion, near Helikon, at Eleusis, and off the coast of Crete. In the autumn of this same year he returned to America, to accept an instructorship in Greek at Harvard College. Teaching was not to his mind, though he had prepared himself conscientiously for that career, and performed its duties with the same mingling of scrupulous attention to detail with a sense of large values and real proportions which characterized his conduct in all matters of daily life. Nor was it possible for him to deal with such subjects as he was called upon to handle, without eliciting from them a potent charm, testified to by those students who gathered regularly in his rooms to read Plato with him, and who count themselves fortunate to have heard his voice—one of the most beautiful ever given to a human being—as he read and commented upon the great passages of the "Republic."

Besides his regular academic duties, Stickney was engaged during the last winter of his life upon a metrical translation of the "Persians" of Æschylus, and devoted much time to a proposed production of the "Libation Pourers," in which he was to have taken the rôle of Orestes. Meanwhile, he was feverishly at work upon a new volume of poems. From the attitude of his mind at this time, and from certain hints in his writing, it would almost seem as if a premonition of his death, and even of the manner of his death, had come to him:

"With thy two eyes look on me once again.
Since certain days, I know not how it is,
I feel the swell of tidal darknesses
Climb in my soul and overwhelm my brain."

In the spring of 1904, he was stricken with the premonitory symptoms of cerebral tumor, but continued to work at his poems all through the tragic summer which followed, as if striving to pour out in one flood the utterance of years. Under the stress of his affliction all the sweetness, rectitude, and majesty of his nature came out in a transfiguring light. An interval of apparent recovery was followed by a swift culmination of the disease, and he died on the 11th of October. His grave is at Hartford, Connecticut, the former seat of his family.

It is too early for his poetic work to be appraised, even by one

who should be competent to weigh its subtle values and to disentangle in its varied web the tentative from the quite achieved. I can only try to suggest its larger boundaries and to give some faint account of its presiding qualities. It is certain in the first place that Stickney was a poet in the intensive sense of the word. In a case like his, of high intellectual capabilities of a general kind, this may easily fail to receive the emphasis it deserves. Once, when severe illness had brought him face to face with the underlying realities of his own life, he said to me, "The truth is, I care for nothing but poetry." Though he led a richly varied and most human existence, with senses, affections, curiosities all in vivid action, the truth indeed was that poetry was both the root and the flower of his life, the point of repair for all his vital powers. To say this, is to say that he was in the same intimate sense a musician. In a moving lyric of his earlier years he tells the story of his initiation into the art of violin-playing; his last completed dramatic work portrays the unsatisfied passion for music in the breast of an old man, and its thwarting by his son's devotion to another art; and throughout his poems, images drawn from the world of music show the preoccupation of his mind with the musical idea. His verse is always moved from within by a musical principle, and often ravishes the ear with its melodic beauty. But he did not, as so many nympholepts of verse-music have done, lose himself in this sensuous aspect of the subject. He knew that there is, quite literally, a *music* of ideas as well as of sounds, and that only from the organic union of the two is poetry born. With many temptations thereto, he refused to work in the spirit of virtuosity. His melodies are simple, his color temperate, his images unstartling. It is only after a time that the organic power of his best work emerges for the reader, and its modesty is seen to veil a new, surpassing grace.

His work divides itself almost equally into the lyric and the dramatic modes. The lyrics are for the most part transcripts from his personal experience, fountains of natural melody gushing out from the smitten places of a young man's life. The greater number, and the best, are lyrics of love. Of these there are two groups. One, a formal sequence entitled "*Eride*," appeared in "*Dramatic Verses*," now reprinted in its entirety. "*Eride*" is a group of twenty-eight short poems, in five divi-

sions. It follows a love-history through its changing phases with a sincerity, a sensitiveness, a yearning search for the heart of the mystery, and a humility before its baffling silence and withdrawal, which I think in all seriousness entitles it to a place in the Golden Book of English love-poems. "Eride" is undeniably youthful in feeling, if that be a reproach; and the sequence ends upon a chord of half-resolved bitterness, the irrepressible protest of youth against the loss of happiness, bursting up suddenly from the depths of apparent resignation:

"How much it aches to linger in these things!
I thought the perfect end of love was peace,
After the long-forgiven sufferings;
But something else, I know not what it is,

"The words that came so nearly and then not,
The vanity, the error of the whole,
The strong cross-purpose, oh, I know not what,
Cries dreadfully in the distracted soul."

And elsewhere throughout these early poems there is the turbulence and acidity of a spirit at war with itself, waging the ancient internecine strife which only the noble wage and only the faithful win. But through many of the posthumous poems there flows, now like golden trumpets muffled by height and distance, now like clearest bird song near at hand, or the whisper of evening trees, the gladness of spiritual victory, won in the face of painful circumstance. I would refer the reader to the piece mentioned above, in which the poet's premonition of his own fate comes out so startlingly,—a spring song of unfulfilled yet fortunate love, sung with inmost thanksgiving in the Valley of the Shadow, which as yet, and for a last magic hour, is still "sunlit and kind." But I will rather quote a few lines from the beautiful verses "In a City Garden":

"How sweet it is
Under the perishable trees
To hear the wings of the one human soul
Fluttering up
In Time's dark branches to the lucid stars.
More than Despair is Hope,
And more than Hope is the Hope that despairs,
And more than all
Is Love that disbelieves the real years.

"Here in this place
One August morning—when the earlier crowd,
Showmen or populace,
From many a region and of curious face,
Abroad the holiday
Quaint in the sun with garb and gesture glowed,
And, speaking grave or gay
The various accents of their lonely race,
Between the shadowy gold bazars idled away—
She, as a cloud
All sunrise-colored and alone,
Through the blue summer trembling came to me.
I dried her tears and here we sat us down.
Little by little, as tripping oversea
On flame-tipped waves the daylight's long surprise
Sweeps world and heaven in one,
So love across our eyes
Broke with the sun. . . .
And wandering out we smiled
To see across the glowing noon so high,
So high and far,
The incandescent minarets and domes and spires
Lifting the fusion of their colored choirs
To the sky. . . .
I came to-day to find her, I came back
Humble with sweet desires
Across this dun September atmosphere
To her.
I came, I knew she was not here:
Now let me go.
I came, I come because I love her so.

"Not in the acres of the soul
Does Nature set the ploughshare of her change.
It is not strange
That here in part and whole
The faithful eye sees all things as before.
For past the newer flowers,
Above the recent trees and clouds come o'er,
Love finds the other hours
Once more."

There is in Stickney's lyric utterance at its best something momentarily unspoken, which betrays to deeper abysses of feeling than are advertised of, which causes the reader, if he be sensitive to such suggestion, to turn and wonder what it is so soul-shaking under the innocent words. The secret of this qual-

ity lies in the poet's profound sincerity, masked, and for a careless or a captious eye defeated, by the play of colored fancy on the surface. At heart Stickney knew no compromise. He proved all things; what he could not accept he let go utterly, and he could accept no alms or half-offerings at the hands of life. What I mean may be illustrated by these stanzas from the poem entitled "At St. Marguerite":

"It rains, and all along and always gulls
Career sea-screaming in and weather-glossed.
It blows here, pushing round the cliff; in lulls
Within the humid stone a motion lost
Ekes out the flurried heartbeat of the coast.

"How good it is, before the dreary flow
Of cloud and water, here to lie alone
And in this desolation to let go
Down the ravine one with another, down
Across the surf to linger or to drown

"The loves that none can give and none receive,
The fearful asking and the small retort,
The life to dream of and the dream to live!
Very much more is nothing than a part,
Nothing at all and darkness in the heart."

But he did not allow this spiritual sternness to end in mere disheartenment or to settle into a schematic pessimism. His mind remained fluid to change. Contrast, for example, the early sonnet "In a Country Churchyard," where he listens with a strange indignation to "the cry of this delirious immortality," uttered by those who are too "poor in heart" to accept Nature's decree of death, with the later lines beginning "A glad little rift, so shy," a thrilling lyric of resurrection, in which a veil of playfulness, almost of glee, masks the portentous theme.

Stickney's lyric work may be said, speaking fallibly, to be complete. If he had lived he would have added to it much that was precious, but he would perhaps not have surpassed his present achievement in kind. His career as a dramatic poet was, on the other hand, assuredly only begun. His first volume contains two remarkable dramatic monologues, the "Oneiropolos," already mentioned, and one entitled "Ludovico Martelli," from a Renaissance poet whose faded volume Stickney picked up one day

in the library at Lucca, where he was engaged in the research of material for his Latin dissertation, "*De Hermolai Barbari Vita et Ingenio*." The speaker in the poem is Ludovico, dying of poison administered by the creatures of Pope Leo, his rival in love. I must spare room for a few lines in which may be read, incidentally, Stickney's own vindication from the charge of following too closely in Browning's footsteps in these works of his poetic apprenticeship:

"They said, they said, 'A soft
 Poet, who stole Petrarca's melodies
 And spoiled his robbery.' Soft in verse I was,
 A master had I like, forsooth, the rest. . . .
 For your unquiet thoughts, the horrid strong,
 I have them,—writ? Not yet! but here's my heart,
 Feel it! So tramped the innumerable host
 When Rome was burned. And very vast a tale
 Were half its history. Often have I stood
 On hills high up, by sorry coasts, alone,
 Passing my vision angrily. I thought
 To have plucked the yellow comets by their hair,
 To have braided meteors, and from 'hind the moon
 Robbed her society of chanting tides.
 I'd stand, my back to the seaward cliffs, at bay
 And fight the wave.—Completed earth's a leaf
 Turning in space along with the other dust
 That blinds the eye of God."

Of poems in true dramatic form, Stickney left two one-act pieces, "Prometheus Pyrphoros" and a scene from the youth of Benvenuto Cellini; one act of an unfinished play on the life of Julian the Apostate; and a number of smaller fragments. It is a thousand pities that he was not able to finish the Julian. There was much in his own character and training to give him peculiar insight into the mind of the poet, scholar, satirist, soldier and world-ruler who, at the moment when pagan civilization was about to be overwhelmed forever by the mounting tide of Christian thought, arose to declare again the ancient gods and to rekindle with indignant hands the violated altars. Stickney intended to write a two-act play in the nature of a prelude, treating the life of Julian before his elevation to the throne, and a five-act drama dealing with his career as emperor. The single act which he completed exhibits a power of dramatic evo-

cation, a massive yet nervous movement, and an athletic strength of diction which promise great things, and indeed, so far as is possible in an unrevised fragment, accomplish them. The slight heaviness which the act betrays would have disappeared in a final reworking, without injury to the imaginative weight, the on-bearing energy, which make it a gage of splendid achievement to come.

The dramatic scene in which Benvenuto Cellini is the central figure gives, on a small but exquisitely finished canvas, a picture of Renaissance character and of the Renaissance passion for art such as Browning himself has hardly surpassed, nor is there any hint in it of apprenticeship to that master; it is stamped with vigorous originality in every part. The scene passes in the living-room of Cellini's father. It is evening, and the old man, after his hard day's work at the mason's craft, sits whittling a viola's back from a cherished piece of wood, and longing for the return of Benvenuto. He is jealous of his son's devotion to sculpture, and as he strives to recall certain beloved songs fast slipping from his memory, he complains to his daughter Cosa:

“Old as I am and poor, 'twere a good life,
Tho' hard the wages, if at ending day
Good music by the candle sat—and his
Outsings by far Italy's loveliest. . . .
This drawing he potters o'er at weary night,
Of groups and visionary postures framed
In scroll-work, while his feverish brain upreared
Hammer and tongs descend upon the ore;
This love of metals and design of forms—
You think him sculptor?”

Presently Benvenuto bursts in, angry and distraught, his brow torn, his clothes in disorder. As he gulps his supper, the father and daughter draw from him his tale of a street-fight with the painter Piero Torrigiani, who has done a dishonor to Michelangelo. Breaking off abruptly, he calls for his pencils and drawing-board, and buries himself in thought of a design “of sirens interlaced with golden scales, roughing a silver ground.” At his father's plea he sings absently one of the songs which the old man has been striving to remember, but immediately buries himself again in his work, muttering:

“How supple is the strength
That coils the rondure of a siren's tail!

It lies within the fine imagination
 Of them of old to shape their legend so
 That monsters have position in the realm
 Of strict anatomy and reasoned things.—
 The frame is square.”

Again the father pleads timidly:

“ Benvenuto,

It is not much to give thy father back
 A fluteful of his breath, to tender him
 Across the early morning of thy voice
 A song's worth of delicious gaiety. . . .
 You know not what it is to hear aloud
 Within the walls of age and poverty
 Your singing child, alive, alert, and full
 Of small perfections in the art you love.”

At last Benvenuto flings his pencils down in angry acquiescence, and plays to Cosa's singing. The old man goes into his bedroom with muttered thanks and blessings, and the boy takes up his task in black impatience:

“ This fluid music clouds me like a slag.
 I cannot see. My fluttering head and hand
 No more are with the metals, and the lines
 Go one into another like threads of wool.
 Among the many arts the lowest much
 Is music, which with pitiable means
 Is scraped and blown and twanged and—no one knows
 How or what for. O curse on 't! To work.
 I can't—must—will.”

GIOVANNI (*looks in at the door in his nightgown*).

“ That song, another time,
 Not quite so fast, and your beginning notes
 Less sudden and attached with subtler breath.
 BENVENUTO. If e'er I play again! He pushes me
 So every evening to the rack. Great God,
 The very rhythm of my design is snapped
 At the root short off, just at the noble moment
 When dream and comprehension fuse in one. . . .
 And here over my ruined vision, I
 Writhe like a scorpion in a ring of fire. . . .
 Enough! At dawn to-morrow off for Rome.”

Within the simple scheme of this little drama there is a wonderful play of life; the characters are completely realized, and the dialogue, while moving always in response to musical laws,

is thoroughly dramatic. Stickney was rapidly mastering the lost secret of an acting drama in which verse-form, so far from weakening the purely dramaturgic element, magically enhances it, becomes, in fact, its very body and breath.

It remains for me to speak of the "Prometheus Pyrphoros," in some respects the piece of writing most expressive of Stickney's genius. The action passes before the rude stone house of Deukalion and Pyrrha, in the plain of Haimonia, and the scene opens in total darkness. The primeval pair talk together of the wretchedness of their lives both before and since the curse of night which Zeus has sent upon the world in revenge for the trick played upon him by Prometheus, in offering him, instead of real sacrifice, "wind-eggs and unsubstantial things." Meanwhile, Prometheus stands in the door of the house, and from within sounds at intervals the voice of Pandora, who is with child by Zeus. Prometheus, in accordance with the ancient mythographers, is spoken of as the father of the human couple, and Pandora is called by them "mother," though there is no hint of any relationship between the Titan and Pandora. Neither is she represented, as in the legend, as the wife of Epimetheus; she remains a mysterious voice, singing in her travail songs of mystic meaning, whose bearing upon the action is poignantly vague. Stung at last beyond endurance by the wretchedness of the human pair, Prometheus declares his purpose of bringing light from Heaven, and departs amid the gray complaints of Deukalion and Pyrrha's words of faltering hope. An episode intervenes, introducing Epimetheus, the antitype and foil of the Promethean spirit of daring will. Suddenly Pyrrha rises, crying:

"He comes, he comes. Nay, look how fast the light

Rolls gaining on the dark, and urges back

The windy boulders of obscurity.

His step! I hear him, I see him.—Prometheus!

PROMETHEUS (*shouting from afar*). This torch will light our lives.

Rejoice! Up, up!

I say we have the sunlight back again."

Prometheus rushes in, and kindles the great pile of fuel which they bring. Then follows a majestic passage in which the Titan relates his climb up the darkling slopes of Olympus, his wresting the sacred torch from the golden scone at the portal of Zeus's dwelling, where it hung

“firm barred across
 And bolted 'gainst the fearful universe,
 While inside cried aloud perennial choirs
 To a single note so puissant and superb
 It seemed an ocean singing to the sun.”

He urges them to take up their lives in gladness and hope. Pyrrha timidly responds, trying by faith to rise to the level of his heroic mind; but Deukalion sees in the new life which has been given them only a further necessity of endurance and barren toil. Meanwhile, darkness falls again over the scene, and from the midst of the thunder-cloud sound the Voices of Zeus (the *Bia* and *Κοάρη* of Æschylus) calling Prometheus to punishment. As he is seized and dragged away, he utters words of indignant pride and triumphant self-vindication:

“I say, whate’er’s achieved, once and for all
 Stands in defiance, and we at Nature’s heart
 Register signs of our nobility.

’Twas with me for a while as with the sun
 Upon the ocean: writing out in gold
 The moving characters of highest day,
 Which to dull creatures of the deep appeared
 Fantastic and divine and possible.”

The play ends with the patient words of Pyrrha to her husband, as a great sunset fills the scene:

“Come, sleep,
 Deukalion, for to-morrow brings again
 The sun he gave us, and the hope—the life,”

and with the mysterious voice of Pandora, singing to herself and of herself within the house:

“As an immortal nightingale
 I sing behind the summer sky,
 Thro’ leaves of starlight gold and pale
 That shiver with my melody.

“My dew is everywhere
 Where things are;
 I fall and flutter and fare,
 Leaving a star
 By the roads of earth, in the far
 Paths of the air.

“Nothing is less with me,
Nothing is lost.
For I smile on the earth and sea,
On the infinite host
Of the dead and the living, and most
On the yet-to-be.”

The source of the “Prometheus Pyrphoros” lies chiefly in Hesiod, and there clings to it something of the gray disheartenment of the “Works and Days.” The heroic deed of the Titan brings with it no joy, rather at best only the courage to live and to Deukalion not so much, merely the hard necessity. The triumph lies in the deed itself and in the magnanimity which achieved it. It is very characteristic of Stickney’s line of thought that he should have given this turn to the great story. Throughout his life, in spite of its fortunate outward circumstances and real happiness, there weighed upon him a nameless oppression, a sense of the futility of the worldly outcome, a shadow of pain and bitterness upon all the fair face of things. But his manner of confronting this tragedy which he saw implicit in the texture of life changed its quality both for himself and for those who knew him. The important thing was seen to be, not the nature of our destiny, but the manner in which it is met. In the human battle it was enough for him that the spear should be “sometimes well grasped, though shattered in the fight,” and that there should stand forth on the lost field the “Niké, proud tho’ broken-winged,” of an unconquerable mind. His was essentially the stoic view, but a stoicism heroic and infinitely tender, pregnant with the sweetness and strength of life. And in the last years of his existence he was coming, as I have said, into a new spiritual zone, which would have brought forth who shall say what celestial fruits.

WILLIAM VAUGHN MOODY.